

A Survey of Researches in Medical Workers' Language

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1. The duty of medical workers is to prevent and cure diseases. This special profession makes it possible that the language of medical workers is not only a medium of communication with patients, but also a most important tool for medical treatment.

Recent study and development of medical psychology have proved that medical workers' language can affect the physiological reaction of patients; And the cerebral cortex of patients can be stimulated by different words of medical workers. Suitable words can not only give patients much warmth and a feeling of being at home, prevent them from mental collapse, help them to be confident of getting rid of illness, and encourage them to give full cooperation with medical workers. It can also be of great use to bring every factor of patients' organism into play, to strengthen patients' resistance to disease and to let organism enter the best state for treatment.

On the contrary, unsuitable words often cause harmful stimuli to patients, making them get angry, worried, hopeless, even causing patients' condition from bad to worse. For example, a patient who had got an incurable disease had been in hospital for several months and was quite eager to go home. One day he asked a young nurse when he could recover and be able to leave hospital. The nurse answered: "You should be patient and not be so eager to look forward to leaving, as there has been no one who lived in this isolation ward to leave it alive before." On hearing this, the patient got entirely disappointed and committed suicide by jumping from a tall building that night.

In the medical history of both China and abroad, there are a lot of examples that medical workers' language helps patients to recover from illness or causes sickness from bad to worse. Almost all medical workers have such experiences as being embarrassed or troubled primarily because of language. Sometimes they speak to patients with good intentions but get the opposite results. Sometimes the same words are understood and responded to variously by different kinds (age, sex, character, profession, educational level etc.) of patients. Even in some cases patients

committed suicide on hearing improper words from doctors.

Take Michael Faraday, a well-known British chemist, for example. It was said when he was young, he often overworked himself and gradually got a bad neurasthenia. After a long period of treatment, there was only little curative effect. Later a famous doctor was sent for. Taking a thorough examination and a detailed inquiry, the doctor did not give any prescription but only a few words "A clown's playing is better than a dozen of doctors". M. Faraday considered the doctor's words carefully and soon got to know the implied meaning of the words. From then on, he tried to strike a proper balance between work and rest, often going to seashore and the outskirts for holidays, watching circuses, comedies and funny performances, and always keeping himself happy. In this way he soon got fully recovered.

Another example is that while a Russian physician was going the rounds of the wards, he didn't stop before the bed of a supposed cancer patient and told his followers in Latin: "This is a case of fatal sickness." The physician thought the patient didn't know Latin and could not understand what he said. But, unfortunately, his extra-ordinary behavior had already revealed that there must be something unusual about the patient's illness. Hence the patient became more suspicious and tried to find out the secret. Not long after he got the real reason did the patient commit suicide. But when his body was dissected, no malignant tumour was found at all. What a pity.

From all these we can see the special function of language in medical treatment. Just as it was said by Zhang Shiwan, a famous doctor in Qing Dynasty: "A doctor should pay much attention to his speaking and behavior as well as to his medical skill. Only in this way could he hope to win the trust, the cooperation from patients and to make success in his medical practice." An ancient Greek doctor Hippocrates, Father of Medicine, has also strongly pointed out: "A doctor has two tools to cure diseases; one is medicine, the other is language." It is thus clear that a qualified doctor in modern society should have not only skillful medical technique, but also excellent proficiency and mastery of arts for speech communication with patients.

2. However, patients come from a wide variety of background, including men and women, old and young, workers and farmers, etc. When they go to doctor, they may have various kinds of intentions, requirements or purposes. Some may really want to seek for medical

service; some may only hope to have a thorough examination to prevent sickness; some may just hope to have a talk with doctors about the troubles in their families, the problems in their work, even the difficulties in their love affairs, in order to win the sympathy of doctors and get psychological satisfaction;.....to name only a few. These different intentions must affect their desires and requirements. How to find out patients' real intentions and take effective measures to help them are often the difficulties for medical workers in their work.

There is a well-known saying by Hippocrates, "It is more important to make it clear what kind of persons falls sick than to know what disease he gets. "This viewpoint implies the close relation of social factors with disease and the necessity for doctors to seek the connection of patients' background to their diseases and their exact purposes of seeing doctors. But whether a doctor can find out patients' real demands or not mostly depends on whether the patients are willing to reveal their innermost feelings. However, if a doctor want to induce a patient to speak out what he thinks, he must pay more attention to his speaking and behavior during the interviews with the patient. We know that language is the main medium of communication between doctors and patients. People often say: "If you drink with a bosom friend, a thousand cups are too few; if you argue with a man, half a sentence is too much." That is quite similar to doctor-patient interviews. If doctors can use language in accordance with different characteristics and psychological requirements of patients, the interviews will probably be very pleasant and smooth. Generally speaking, pleasant interviews often make patients be happy and become confident in doctors. Once patients place confidence in doctors, they will be willing to pour out their hearts and give cooperation. Through proper interviews, doctors can obtain sufficient information about patients' intentions, anxiety, troubles or sickness and then take effective measures to treat them. Otherwise, unpleasant interviews often give patients ill feelings, then they would probably conceal their innermost feelings and put no trust in the doctors. It is needless to say that without a good master of what patients are feeling and thinking, without patients' energetic cooperation, doctors can by no means hope to find out effective measures to treat the patients. So, language is like a tie to link up the hearts of doctors and patients and play an important part both in their communication and in medical treatment.

The various kinds of characteristics of patients

will surely affect their linguistic competence. As the saying goes: "The writing mirrors the writer and it is the same the other way round." That is to say, from one's speaking we can judge his age, profession, character and educational level. And in turn, one's age, profession, character and educational level certainly confine his competence of speaking and understanding. Sometimes the same words are comprehended quite differently by different patients. For instance, when a doctor told a woman farmer: "You are lacking in calcium", the patient felt puzzled and explained promptly: "Why? It is not possible. I always cover my body well with quilt while sleeping." The reason of her misunderstanding was partly because of her educational level, as the pronunciation of the word "calcium" in Chinese sounds "gai", which is quite same with that of "to cover with something (gai)".

Different kinds of patients often have different kinds of characters, and patients of different characters always have different ways of expressing their demands and requirements. Generally, the aged patients often have a strong desire to be respected and to control others. They like to use imperative sentences themselves, but dislike medical workers to use the same mood to them. Farmer patients in general lack in good education. They often have difficulties to express their thought and desire quite exactly. Instead of being in a frank way, female patients always express their demands with some reservation. But intellectual patients often hope to play a part in making the plans for their treatment. So medical workers should know something about the differences of linguistic competence and the characteristics of speaking of different patients.

Another chief factor that causes barriers in speech communication is the difference of cultures, as different cultures often have different customs and idiomatic ways to express the same things. When an Englishman says "I have a stomachache", he may not exactly mean he has a stomach trouble. In some cases he may mean there is some trouble in his abdomen. However, in Chinese, there is a distinction between the phrases "to have a stomachache" and "to have an ache in abdomen". Only when young women want to express the ache in abdomen mildly would they say "to have a stomachache". But in the dialect of Sichuan Province of China, the expression is very interesting and exceptional. No matter inner surface part of belly suffers pain, the people there would say "wo de du pi teng" which means "to have a pain in the skin of abdomen". Therefore, medical workers should pay

attention to patients' personal background, culture, ability of understanding language and speak to them according to their special characteristics.

Besides using proper words, medical workers must try to use proper methods while speaking to patients. Once, a psychiatrist wanted to induce a patient to reveal his innermost feelings by asking him: "I was told that someone wanted to murder you and followed you day and night. Please tell me the reason. I can help you." But he didn't get a word from the patient.

Sometimes when gynaecologists ask a pregnant woman who is in parturition not to give strength, it seems that the woman hears nothing of the suggestion and goes on putting forth her strength. When nurses give children injections, they always ask them not to cry. But it is quite often that the children cry out before the preparation of injection is ready. Of course these requirements are quite right. Then, why couldn't they get the anticipated results? Probably it is because of the methods of the requirements. When speaking "not to cry", they have already given the children a hint of crying. When asked "not to give strength", the first idea and feeling the pregnant woman gets is strength. These negative suggestions often get the opposite results. But if they give patients suggestions in a positive way by telling the pregnant woman "Please take deep breath when you feel pressed and want to give strength", and asking the children "Please be brave, my dear", they often could get pregnant woman's and children's cooperation. It is thus clear that there are really some arts and techniques in speech communication between medical workers and patients.

3. The professional characteristics of medical workers is "healing the wounded and rescuing the dying", which determines the special function of medical workers' language. Besides a medium to exchange thinking and feeling with patients, medical workers' language can serve as an effective method to win patients' trust, to alleviate patients' mental burdens, and to prevent or cure illness.

A. Function in Doctor-Patient Relation

In the course of medical treatment, doctors and patients contact directly with each other. For this reason, there exists a relation between doctors and patients. In fact, there is no conflict of interests between them, for to cure patients of their illness is the duty of medical workers and the common aspiration of both doctors and patients. However, as their positions are different in medical treatment, doctors

and patients often consider and regard things quite differently. Doctors always consider cases as a whole and sometimes let patients have a temporary suffering in order to get much more benefits in the future. For instance, giving a gastrectomy to a patient with gastric ulcer. Sometimes patients do not know or understand the necessity of the operation and will probably not give proper cooperation. During the period of receiving medical treatment, some patients are often in psychological confliction. On one hand, they hope doctors to help them get rid of disease are willing to listen to doctors' instructions. On the other hand, they are full of worries, afraid of being treated so late, being diagnosed as a fatal case, or being diagnosed as a 'disgraceful' case. Therefore, they might sometimes hide their sickness for fear of treatment. Such situation as each has his difficulties between doctors and patients sometimes is quite complicated. But how to change the situation of "one purpose but different distress" relies on each other's respect, understanding, trust and cooperation, that is to say relying on a very good relation of both sides. Nevertheless, the establishment of such a good relation relies to a great extent on medical workers' speaking and behavior.

We know that the course of a diagnosis and treatment is a course of cooperation between doctors and patients. A successful treatment not merely depends on doctors' efforts, but needs patients cooperation. However, whether a patient is willing to cooperate or listen to doctors' suggestions has a very close relation with the characteristics of doctor-patient relation. It is often the case that the more a patient respects of trust a doctor, and is satisfied with the plans for treatment, the more he would cooperate with doctors. But whether a doctor can win the trust and cooperation from patients mainly depends on his speaking and behavior.

Generally speaking, suitable and polite words can impel patients to feel happy and warm, to trust doctors and to give an active cooperation. Otherwise, rude and unsuitable words often make patients get angry, upset and lose trust in doctors. Though it might hurt his health, sometimes he would refuse to cooperate with doctors. Once, a patient suffering from neurasthenia asked a doctor: "When do you think I could be perfectly recovered, Mr. doctor?"

"I am not a fortune-teller. How could I know?" the doctor answered, impatiently.

"I know it is hard to say about it, Mr. doctor. But would you tell me what I should pay attention to in the

future?" said the patient.

The doctor replied sarcastically: "Don't go off into wild flights of fancy. In particular, don't always think of beautiful girls."

On hearing the words, the patient was so angry that he threw the prescription on the ground and left indignantly.

It is very clear that medical workers' language plays an important role in establishing a good relation between doctors and patients.

B. Function in Psychotherapy

Though there are various kinds of diseases among mankind, the causes of the diseases can roughly be divided into two: biological factors and social-psychological factors. The diseases caused by biological factors can be treated by medicine, operation or radiotherapy. But such therapy is not so effective to the diseases caused by social-psychological factors. Therefore, psychotherapy is needed.

Psychotherapy is a method of treatment in which doctors use their language, manners, attitudes and so on to hint, affect patients' feeling, emotion, attitudes and manners, thus helping patients to lighten nervousness, negative feeling and abnormal behavior, to increase confidence to get rid of disease, and finally to attain the goal to treat the disease.

Psychotherapy contain several concrete methods, including explanation, encouragement, comfort, suggestion, assurance and so on. But language plays an important role among all these methods. It was long time ago since doctors began to realize the importance of language in medical treatment. They paid much attention to psychotherapy and left many good examples.

There was a case in Qing Dynasty of China, a candidate from South China went to Beijing to take part in the imperial examinations. When he was told that he had got Number One Scholar in the exam, he was too excited to control himself and became mad. A famous doctor was sent for and after a thorough examination, the doctor told the candidate: "There is no way to treat your illness. You could live no longer than ten days. Please go back to your home as quick as possible, or you might die on the way." The doctor also asked the candidate to see a doctor in Zhenjiang on his way home. When the candidate got to Zhenjiang, he became recovered and felt quite puzzled about it. That was a typical case caused by psychological factors and cured by psychotherapy method. In fact, the reason of the candidate's illness was extreme joy, which could not

be treated only by medicine. So the doctor used scareful words to frighten him and make him become melancholy. Such method is called "to combat emotion with emotion".

Comfort is another common method of psychotherapy. If medical workers can use cordial and suitable words to comfort patients and encourage them to be confident when patients feel sad and disheartened, it is always like sending charcoal to them in snowy weather and can get a very good result.

However, a successful comfort always depends on appropriate and suitable comforting words. Some doctors often use "To eat well. To rest well. Don't worry about anything. Just set your mind at rest for your rest life "to comfort old patients. But they often could not obtain the desired results, as they neglect the lofty aspirations held by the old people. So, comfort is an art and a technique. If a doctor hopes to achieve good results in comforting patients, he must speak with appropriate comforting words.

C. Function to cure or cause illness

Language is a special stimulus to nervous system. It affects people's physiology and psychology through cerebrum. From the physiological point of view, when the stimulus of harmful words get into cerebral cortex, it is through sympathetic nerve and parasympathetic nerve to affect nerve centre, causing people's hearts beating faster, blood pressure getting higher, internal system going out of order, finally leading to disease.

From the psychological point of view, when a person falls ill, he often concentrates his attention on his health and his mind is full of heavy mental burdens, worrying about his illness, his future life and his work. Under such circumstances, he is quite sensitive to medical workers' speaking, attitudes, manners and easily to be influenced by them. Therefore, medical workers' language has become a power that can help to cure illness or cause illness from bad to worse. For example, a patient was examined by X-ray and was found there was a tumour in his stomach. But he did not care much about it. Three months later he came back to the hospital for a check. A doctor looked at the picture and cried out: "Oh, it has become larger. I suggested three months ago you stay in hospital for treatment, but you didn't listen to me. You know it is more serious now. You must stay in hospital for treatment right now." At these words, the patient who went to the hospital on foot was paralysed with fright. It is clear that medical workers' language can cure or

cause illness.

4. The history of researches in medical workers' language goes back to ancient time. As early as four thousand years ago, a chemist from Iran realized the importance of language in medical treatment and pointed out: "Doctors have three weapons to cure sickness; they are language, medicine and knife." The ancient Chinese medical classics "Nei Jing" has collected the achievements of the researches about medical workers' language by former generations. In the book there are many good descriptions and concrete methods of how to speak to and persuade different kinds of patients. Here are some examples: "Tell him the harm of his sickness to make him take it seriously; let him be sure that if he has strong confidence and cooperate well with doctors, he could surely recover; show sympathy and care towards patients, help him to be relieved of mental burdens." "Use heartedful words to comfort the patients who feel desperate. Try to please the patients who are full of anger. Show sympathy to those who are full of sorrow. If a doctor can master and use these methods, he may be regarded as a good one." Li Hua, a famous doctor in Tang Dynasty, wrote a book which recorded many cases of using language in medical treatment by doctors.

With the development of science, economy and society, the tables of disease and death have changed. Sociological and psychological factors have become the main cause of disease or death. So people are getting more dissatisfied with the traditional biomedical pattern and have come to realize the necessity to solve medical problems from a broad and systematic point of view. For this reason, a new medical pattern "Biological-Psychological-Sociological" has emerged as the times require. In order to catch up with the need of rapid development of medical science, many scholars, especially in linguistic and medical circles, have begun to pay more attention to the study of language in medical treatment. From 1977, two American Linguists W. Labov and Fanshel began to study the interviews between doctors and patients. Through research work, they believed that "A Qualified doctor in modern society should have the ability to judge the characteristics of patients. All medical workers must know the fact that once a patient becomes confident in a doctor, it will become great strength. This strength will be of great help for medical treatment and can often make a miracle. But whether a doctor can win the trust of patients or not chiefly depends on his speaking and behavior."

Though it has been long time since scholars realized the importance of language in medical treatment, the researches of it are far from being scientific and systematic. So I think that to strengthen the study of medical workers' language and to analyze its function in medical treatment from a wide and profound point of view are the need of the development of science, society, as well as that of linguistics. Only in this way can we hope linguistics to do much help to medical treatment and to enlarge its contribution to science and society.

It is thus clear that the researches in medical workers' language will surely have a very bright future.